

# The Local Landmarker

Issue 2, December 2006



*On the Cover: Madison Hall, in Morrisville, Madison County. Built in 1865 as the Madison County Courthouse, this structure was saved through the efforts of local citizens who saw it one of the iconic structures of their community. It now serves as multipurpose space, with the former upper floor courtroom serving as a meeting space and theater. Morrisville, located on Route 20 in Madison County in central New York State, became a Certified Local Government in 1998.*

## From the Coordinator

Welcome to the second edition of *The Local Landmarker*, a newsletter for the Certified Local Government (CLG) community in New York State. I continue to travel around the state, meeting the people who form the community and learning about what tools local commissions need to do their job. I am continually impressed with the passion and dedication commission members have in maintaining their community's historic resources and through them, its unique "sense of place."

"**Managing change**" is a phrase I like to use when discussing the core philosophy of historic preservation, either at a federal, state, or local level. Key to the idea that preservationists are working to manage change is that many of our historic urban areas, residential neighborhoods, and shared public spaces are products of many years of change and growth themselves. Sometimes people accuse us of wanting nothing to change. However, change is often unavoidable in the life of a building, neighborhood, or city if it is to survive and thrive. John W. Lawrence, a former dean of the School of Architecture at Tulane University, wrote:

*"The basic purpose of preservation is not to arrest time but to mediate sensitively with the forces of change."* (John W. Lawrence, April 24, 1970).

Therefore, preservationists have the challenging task of overseeing and guiding growth and change to ensure that the best of the past is passed forward to the future while at the same time mediating "sensitively with the forces of change."

Making decisions on proposed changes to historic properties is the core activity of local historic preservation commissions and architectural review boards. Some proposed changes may be perfectly appropriate; others may cause harm to a historic resource's materials and compromise its design. Some may also affect the settings of adjacent buildings. How do you tell the difference? One way to do so is by using a proven set of review standards and/or guidelines.

Establishing standards and criteria for review of proposed changes is the subject of this issue. Check what your commission uses as its base for decisions about proposed changes. It might be time to refresh your knowledge of what they are, adopt ones if you have not done so, revise ones to reflect recent experience, or simply make others more aware of the standards you use. As always, I look forward to seeing you in the coming months.

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## What are Standards, and why use them?

In most ordinances or laws that create a local historic preservation commission or architectural review board, that body is given the power for the “Promulgation of rules and regulations as necessary to carry out the duties of the Commission” (New York State Model Law, Section 2, D, ii.)

One such action many commissions in New York State have undertaken under those powers is the adoption of guidelines and standards for reviewing projects brought before them. CLG member communities such as Utica, Yonkers, and Rochester have drawn up design guidelines, detailed and specific to their communities. However, it is important to note that regardless of where they have been drawn up, these local guidelines use a common base for language and practice, the *Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation (Secretary’s Standards)*.

The *Secretary’s Standards* were initially created by the Secretary of the Interior to review proposed work at National Register listed properties receiving repair and construction grants from the federal Historic Preservation Fund. Since their creation, however, the *Secretary’s Standards* have been adopted as the review guidelines for basically every federal and state preservation program. They have also influenced thousands of commissions and boards across the country.

Having standards can ensure that every project is reviewed using the same approach and philosophy, giving a sound foundation for those reviewing proposed work. Standards can also guide applicants to a better understanding of what may or may not be an approvable application. Having standards can give a comfort level to everyone involved in the process, providing a sense of stability, professionalism, and sound decision making. Standards can also provide continuity during turn-over in membership.

To better understand the *Secretary’s Standards*, understanding “rehabilitation” (as defined by the National Park Service), is important.

Rehabilitation is defined as the process of returning a property to a state of utility, through repair or alteration, which makes possible an efficient contemporary use while preserving those portions and features of the property which are significant to its historic, architectural, and cultural values” (The Secretary of the Interior’s Standards, National Park Service, 1995, online; <http://www.cr.nps.gov/hps/tps/tax/rhb/stand.htm>).

As can be seen in the definition, the Standards were written specifically to deal with proposed changes to historic resources. Key to the philosophy behind the *Secretary’s Standards* is that after any proposed changes, a historic resource’s historic character is preserved.

### **The Secretary of the Interior's Standards**

1. A property shall be used for its historic purpose or be placed in a new use that requires minimal change to the defining characteristics of the building and its site and environment.
  2. The historic character of a property shall be retained and preserved. The removal of historic materials or alteration of features and spaces that characterize a property shall be avoided.
  3. Each property shall be recognized as a physical record of its time, place, and use. Changes that create a false sense of historical development, such as adding conjectural features or architectural elements from other buildings, shall not be undertaken.
  4. Most properties change over time; those changes that have acquired historic significance in their own right shall be retained and preserved.
  5. Distinctive features, finishes, and construction techniques or examples of craftsmanship that characterize a property shall be preserved.
  6. Deteriorated historic features shall be repaired rather than replaced. Where the severity of deterioration requires replacement of a distinctive feature, the new feature shall match the old in design, color, texture, and other visual qualities and, where possible, materials. Replacement of missing features shall be substantiated by documentary, physical, or pictorial evidence.
  7. Chemical or physical treatments, such as sandblasting, that cause damage to historic materials shall not be used. The surface cleaning of structures, if appropriate, shall be undertaken using the gentlest means possible.
  8. Significant archeological resources affected by a project shall be protected and preserved. If such resources must be disturbed, mitigation measures shall be undertaken.
  9. New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction shall not destroy historic materials that characterize the property. The new work shall be differentiated from the old and shall be compatible with the massing, size, scale, and architectural features to protect the historic integrity of the property and its environment.
  10. New additions and adjacent or related new construction shall be undertaken in such a manner that if removed in the future, the essential form and integrity of the historic property and its environment would be unimpaired.
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### **What if we don't have standards for review?**

If your commission or board hasn't adopted any specific standards for review, don't panic. The base criteria in your ordinance have probably been serving you well and will for some time. However, you may wish to examine what standards and guidelines might mean for your commission or board and your community.

One step may be to review the *Secretary's Standards* and see if they would work for your community. With them come a history of use and interpretation as well as published materials that your body can use as a base for decision making. As noted earlier, some municipalities have adopted these verbatim and are using them successfully.

Also, as noted earlier, some CLG communities have created their own set of standards and guidelines, specific to their communities. Several of these efforts have been undertaken with CLG grants. Below are some examples with brief descriptions of the publications. It is important to note, however, that these guidelines, written to address specific issues or building types, are firmly based in the *Secretary's Standards*

#### **The City of Yonkers**

Yonkers published the *Yonkers Historic Design Guidelines* in 2005. The *Guidelines* are primarily addressed towards historic houses in the city and list the historic neighborhoods covered by the commission, with notes on the development and the prevalent styles in those areas. This is followed by an architectural history chapter, using examples within Yonkers to illustrate different styles. The heart of the *Guidelines* is contained in "Part 2," which uses local examples of building materials, elements, and features to illustrate recommended and non-recommended treatments. Each discussion of a feature or material includes a "Further reading" list to assist reviewer and applicants if they wish to find more information about that specific point. Appendices cover hiring an architect, hiring a contractor, what districts and landmarks exist in Yonkers, and a list of available products for work at historic homes. This publication recently won an award from the Lower Hudson Conference of Historical Agencies and Museums, which called it "clear, educational, (and) instructive."

#### **The Village of Southampton**

Southampton published its *Architectural Design Guidelines for Historic Districts and Landmarks* in September of 2000. In "Why Design Guidelines?" on page 3 is an important statement. The author states that until publication "The Board of Architectural Review has had to make decisions on appropriate new construction and/or alterations within the historic districts on an *ad hoc* basis, without the benefit of clear architectural design guidelines." The "Purpose" statement, also on page 3, is revealing as well: "These architectural design guidelines were developed to provide general recommendations and to outline procedures to guide you, the property owner, as well as the Board of Architectural Review." The intent is to educate everyone involved in the review process, on both sides of the table, and to create a base for a common dialogue. As with the Yonkers example, a discussion of architectural styles common to Southampton is included, along with a description of common work items with bulleted notes marked "Avoid" describing what work may not be acceptable to the Board of Architectural Review. An architectural glossary at the end gives language for easy and accurate communication between board members and applicants.

### **Village of Sackets Harbor**

In 1993, the Village of Sackets Harbor created *Guidelines for Quality Sign Design* to ensure that signage in its historic district was not out of place in its setting or damaging to the historic resource on which it was mounted or hung. Material, coloring, lettering, and lighting are covered, and a “Work Sheet” is included to summarize the guidelines and assist the design process for a sign. This publication is more specific than a general architectural guideline, but it was seen as a necessary and worthwhile effort by the village planning board, which oversees sign permits.

### **What Standards Do (or don't do)**

The adoption of standards does not mean that all conversation, debate, or discomfort is taken out of the review process. Contrary to some, they also do not squelch creativity or suddenly put extremely close limits on what can be done at a landmarked building or built within an historic district. Rather, they are guidelines within which to work, learn, and discuss.

To be sure, there will be certain things that standards will automatically term inappropriate, such as treatments to historic materials that either cause damage or accelerate deterioration, or wholesale removal or obscuring of significant historic features in good or repairable condition. Other issues, such as additions to an historic building or new construction, are at best given boundaries but not exact or specific design solutions.

What standards should accomplish can be summed up in a statement in the Sackets Harbor *Guidelines for Quality Sign Design*. In a section entitled “Purpose of this Manual” is the following: “The manual won't design your sign for you, and won't provide you with a standard format or template to follow.” The same can be said for how standards can help guide review. Standards and guidelines do not answer every question with a pat response. However, they do give a sound footing to commissions and boards wrestling with how to approach a proposal to remove a porch, add a garage, change a roofline, or build a new house in a Victorian-era neighborhood. They can also give guidance and comfort to an applicant confused about what answer he or she will get at the review hearing. Having that comfort level for both applicant and reviewer can be invaluable in getting the job of managing change in your community done, and done well.

## Featured Website

In keeping with the topic of this issue of the *Local Landmarker*, this issue's featured website is the National Park Service's "Illustrated Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Properties." It's a good site for anyone just beginning design review as well as those who have been at it for some time. It's educational about the *Secretary's Standards* themselves as well as the history and nature of building materials and features, including "recommended" and "not recommended" treatments, with many pictures along with text. You can also pass it along to applicants, as an aid to educating them about how to treat a historic building.

<http://www.cr.nps.gov/hps/tps/tax/rhb/>



*Built in 1864 as the First National Bank of Morrisville, this temple front building now serves as an office. Unique in its use of a Roman-influenced form and details rather than those of the prevailing Greek Revival style, it also has cast iron column bases, capitals, and window hood, which were the latest technology in building materials at the time.*

## The Back Page

These points are adopted from the CLG program in the State of Florida. I think they are good reminders of how a historic preservation commission or architectural review board should approach their work!

### **Do and Don'ts when reviewing proposals**

#### **DO**

- Read your community's historic preservation ordinance and refer to it often. Make special note of the purposes of the ordinance.
- Be friendly with all applicants and leave them with a good impression of the local government process.
- Use the specific criteria outlined in the ordinance for designating districts and/or landmarks when making designations.
- Use the design guidelines in the ordinance when making a decision on the appropriateness of a building alteration.
- Review each application as a separate case and apply the ordinance's criteria each time

#### **DO NOT**

- Apply your idea of what is "pretty" or "in good taste" to decide if a proposed alteration is appropriate.
- Require a design of all new buildings, alterations or additions to follow a particular theme or architectural style.
- Embarrass the applicant by criticizing his/her application openly in the meeting or in the media.
- Turn down an application without giving the applicant specific guidance as to how the application could be improved to meet the criteria of the ordinance.
- Be afraid to ask the applicant for more information if the application is incomplete or if there is not enough information to make a decision.